



SAINT PETER'S CHURCH

Does Prayer "Work?"

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph Schaller
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost ~ July 28, 2019*

Genesis 18:20-32

So YHWH said to Abraham, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is terrible, and their sin is so grave that I must go down and see for myself. myself. If they have done what her cry against them† accuse them of, I will destroy them. If not, I need to know that, too." While the travelers walked along toward Sodom, Abraham remained in YHWH's presence. Then Abraham drew closer and said, "Will you sweep away the innocent and the guilty? Suppose there were fifty innocent people in the city; would you wipe out the place, rather than spare it for the sake of the fifty innocent within it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to make the innocent die with the guilty! Should the innocent and the guilty be treated the same way? Heaven forbid it! Shouldn't the Judge of the earth act with justice?" YHWH replied, "If I find fifty innocent people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake." Abraham spoke up again: "See how I presume to speak to my Sovereign, though I am only dust and ashes! What if there are forty-five innocent people? Will you destroy the whole city for the lack of those five?" "I will not destroy it," God answered, "if I find forty-five there." Abraham persisted, and said, "What if only forty are found there?" God replied, "For the sake of the forty, I will not destroy it." Then Abraham said, "Let not my Sovereign grow impatient if I go on. What if only thirty are found there?" God replied, "For the sake of the thirty, I will not destroy it." Still Abraham went on, "Since I have thus dared to speak to my Sovereign, what if there are no more than twenty?" Abraham persisted: "Please, do not be angry if I speak up this last time. What if there are only ten there?" "For the sake of the ten," God replied, "I will not destroy it."

Psalm 138

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>1 I will give thanks to you, O God, with my whole heart; *
before the gods I will sing your praise.</p> <p>2 I will bow down toward your holy temple
and praise your Name, *
because of your love and faithfulness;</p> <p>3 For you have glorified your Name *
and your word above all things.</p> <p>4 When I called, you answered me; *
you increased my strength within me.</p> <p>5 All the rulers of the earth will praise you, O God, *
when they have heard the words of your mouth.</p> <p>6 They will sing of the ways of God, *</p> | <p>that great is the glory of God,</p> <p>7 Who is on high, yet cares for the lowly, *
and perceives the haughty from afar.</p> <p>8 Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you keep me safe;
*
you stretch forth your hand
against the fury of my enemies;
your right hand shall save me.</p> <p>9 You will make good your purpose for me; *
O God, your love endures for ever;
do not abandon the works of your hands.</p> |
|---|--|

Colossians 2:6-19

Christ, though in the image of God, didn't deem equality with God something to be clung to—but instead became completely empty and took on the image of oppressed humankind: born into the human condition, found in the likeness of a human being. 8 Jesus was thus humbled—obediently accepting death, even death on a cross! 9 Because of this, God highly exalted Christ and gave to Jesus the name above every other name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee must bend in the heavens, on the earth and under the earth, and every tongue proclaim to the glory of God: Jesus Christ reigns supreme! Therefore, my dear friends, you who are always obedient to my urging, work out your salvation with fear and trembling, not only when I happen to be with you, but all the more now that I'm absent. It is God at work in you that creates the desire to do God's will. In everything you do, act without grumbling or arguing; prove yourselves innocent and straightforward, children of God beyond reproach, in the midst of a twisted and

depraved generation—among which you shine like stars in the sky, while holding fast to the word of life. As I look to the day of Christ, you give me cause to boast, proving that I didn't run the race in vain or work to no purpose. Even if my life is to be poured out like a libation upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I'm glad of it and rejoice with all of you. May you be glad for the same reason, and rejoice with me! I hope in our Savior Jesus to send Timothy to you soon. And I will be cheered when I hear news of you.

Luke 11:1-13

One day Jesus was praying, and when he had finished, one of the disciples asked, "Rabbi, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples." Jesus said to them, "When you pray, say, 'Abba God, hallowed be your Name! May your reign come. Give us today Tomorrow's bread. 4 Forgive us our sins, for we too forgive everyone who sins against us; and don't let us be subjected to the Test.'" Jesus said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, a neighbor, and you go to your neighbor at midnight and say, 'Lend me three loaves of bread, 6 because friends of mine on a journey have come to me, and I have nothing to set before them.' "Then your neighbor says, 'Leave me alone. The door is already locked and the children and I are in bed. I can't get up to look after your needs.' I tell you, though your neighbor will not get up to give you the bread out of friendship, your persistence will make your neighbor get up and give you as much as you need. "That's why I tell you, keep asking and you'll receive; keep looking and you'll find; keep knocking and the door will be opened to you. For whoever asks, receives; whoever seeks, finds; whoever knocks, is admitted. What parents among you will give a snake to their child when the child asks for a fish, or a scorpion when the child asks for an egg? If you, with all your sins, know how to give your children good things, how much more will our heavenly Abba give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?"

Lately I've noticed a few large billboards popping up along area highways: Featuring large words against a dark background: WHEN YOU DIE, YOU WILL MEET GOD. Well, I certainly hope so. In fact, I'm banking on this. I happen to have a list of a few questions I've been wanting to ask God, and, more importantly get some answers. For example: *Why do the innocent suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why did you have to create mosquitoes? Why do the Philistines usually end up disappointing us? And, why does the sloth always get such a bad rap?* Another might be: *how do you decide which prayers to answer?* You may have your own list.

The idea of questioning the Almighty might seem like the ultimate example of hubris and impertinence. But I would claim this attitude puts us firmly in the Abrahamic tradition. Abraham, who at one point seemed willingly to sacrifice his only son to God without question, also seems to be able to push back at God a little bit. Speaking of bad raps, you can't get much worse than the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah! I won't get into the thorny debate of why these two places came to embody the worst of human behavior, except to suggest that it probably has very little to do with sexuality. What matters is the apparent temptation of God to wipe out everyone and start over again. Now there are many renditions of God throughout the Hebrew scriptures, including those which show us a God who is transcendentally awesome, tender, maternal and extraordinarily patient. But here God sounds like a petty warlord, intent upon wholesale vengeance. And Abraham steps in to bargain on behalf of the people, eventually haggling out a deal to preserve these towns if only ten righteous individuals can be found. This is a pretty low bar, unless perhaps we're talking about Washington, DC. (Sorry, that's a cheap shot. I could actually name at least ten righteous people by name who happen to live and work within the District of Columbia...) But this is really an amazing scene of a human being arguing with God, and apparently changing God's mind.

The practice of prayer within the Christian tradition is both familiar and intensely mysterious. We are enjoined to do it often, if not constantly. Most of us probably feel we don't do it enough, or don't do it correctly. But we also know that there are many forms of prayer. Prayer is both private and communal, as in the liturgy. Some are devoted to prayer and are strong in their conviction about its efficacy. But many of us may harbor a degree of skepticism regarding the power of prayer to accomplish what seems to be promised. And, for all of the sermons and classes and books describing Christian prayer, we may find ourselves somewhat vague about what prayer really is.

Abraham's intervention on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah might be considered prayer—a strong form of intercessory prayer which seems to get results! You could think of prayer as a kind of bargaining with God in an effort to change God's mind or get something that we want. In particular, Jesus urges us to ask for what we need, but to be honest about that, why do we have to do that if every hair on our head is counted and God knows what we need before we even ask? Sometimes we use prayer as if we are trying to get the attention of a distracted God who has so many things to attend to that we need to be sure God is paying attention to us or whoever or whatever we are praying for. Or prayer becomes like a pledge drive, where we accumulate enough prayers to accomplish whatever goal is at hand.

The problem with all of this, as I see it, is that we are thinking of prayer as a form of power used to control God and certain outcomes in our lives or in the world. And while there are certainly times when prayers seem to be answered, it is far more common to experience the disappointment when prayers seem to be ineffectual. How long can we sustain prayers for peace in the world when peace remains so elusive? How can we fervently pray for the recovery of a loved-one after losing close friends or family? The elephant in the room about prayer is that, most of the time, we have trouble believing it really makes a difference.

But what if we think of prayer not as an effort to control anything but as a confession of powerlessness. It has much less to do with changing God's mind than with forming our own. Now, powerlessness is not a pleasant state of being? Usually, we will do anything we can to avoid feelings of helplessness or loss of control. Depression is virtually a chronic state of helplessness and hopelessness, which can at times render someone apparently incapable of any sense of personal agency. So is it really good to encourage that we embrace an awareness of our own powerlessness? In this regard, I've often been inspired with what I have learned about 12-step recovery programs from those who participate in these communities. There is a marvelous paradox in the fundamental proposition of what is required to overcome addiction. The first step is the admission of powerlessness over whatever substance or behavior has taken over a person's life. But once that premise is accepted, almost everything else has to do with what can be done to bring about change. And the most powerful aspect of recovery has to do with relationships: the restoration of relationship with oneself and others, and the creation of new relationships in solidarity with other recovering individuals. And, yes, a relationship with a power beyond oneself.

I believe that prayer is fundamentally about relationship: both a relationship with God but also a relationship with community. The story about Abraham is not so much about his skill in negotiation, but rather the kind of relationship which had been built with God: a relationship which allows for argument, disagreement, persuasion and acceptance. When we pray, we enter into relationship with God, even though God's mutual presence may not be so easily grasped. When we pray for others—those known or not personally known to us—we are entering into a relationship and acknowledging our participation in human community. We pray about things that daunt us, things beyond our control. To surrender to powerlessness doesn't mean we just throw up our hands and go home. Prayer shapes out attitudes and our hearts. It sensitizes us to what really matters. And, paradoxically, it often empowers us to do what we might do to make a difference.

In Luke, Jesus seems to be doing two things: First of all, he is cutting through a certain mystification of prayer which had come to dominate the religious culture of the middle east of the time. Prayer became the prerogative of the religious elite who could mediate between God and the ordinary folk. This actually is a bit like the medieval cult of Catholicism which made the prayer of the priest more efficacious than that of the person in the pew. Jesus is, in effect saying, *keep it simple!* The second point Jesus makes is about the efficacy of prayer and the importance of giving oneself over to the God and God's spirit who will come to our aid. I'll admit I can't fully reconcile my own sense of prayer with the assertion that prayers are as easily answered as requests made to friends and parents. But I give greater weight to the relational images that speak to a God who is intimately caring and concerned about our needs. Friends and parents know that not every request can be granted, but at best, we seek to carefully attend to our responsibility to give what we can to others. And in asking for what we need, we put ourselves in a position of dependency and acknowledge our reliance on someone beyond ourselves. It is difficult to reconcile the many variations and beliefs about prayer, but as with so many other mysteries of Christian belief, it's better to go deeper into the mystery rather than run from it!

I recently came across a different translation of the Lord's prayer, by Neil Douglas-Klotz, from his book *Prayers of the Cosmos: Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus*. The translation of texts greatly affects their meaning, as we know even by the fact that we have two translations of the "Lord's Prayer" available in our Book of Common Prayer. Douglas-Klotz allows the influence of Sufi mysticism as well as contemporary feminism and cosmology to guide his translation of the original Aramaic texts, rendering the following as the Prayer of Jesus:

*Infinitely tender, faithful God,
Holy is Your name.
May your deepest longings bear fruit in us
As throughout all time and space.
You give us love every moment,
sufficient for our journey.
In Your deep compassion You forgive us,
And grace us to forgive one another.
You draw us toward you in light,
And stretch out your hand to us in darkness.
For yours is the Cosmos, and in you, all creative power
and fulfillment. Amen.*